



afew
**DOLLARS
MORE...**

Paul and Helen are in cowboy country, heading down towards the Mexican border, however persistent money issue leads to them to do a spot of work

Words and Pictures by Paul and Helen Crittenden

AFTER PHONING and emailing over 60 Land Rover dealerships throughout the US with what we thought was a 'no-brainer' marketing idea, we had, like the early settlers, eventually struck gold in California. Two dealerships in San Francisco had agreed to pay us to show up and make their customer appreciation events a bit more lively and interesting with some tales of our adventures – and misadventures.

So, with a glimmer of hope shining on our funding plans we set off for the city famous for its trams, plunging city streets, suspension bridges and Alcatraz.

But getting into California was to provide similar obstacles as getting into the US itself. Aggro-culture was about to rear its ugly head again – The Department of Agriculture roadblock loomed as we approached the State border from Nevada.

"Do you have any fruits or vegetables on board?," we were asked.

"Two apples, one pear and half a bag of carrots," we replied.

"I need to see them," came the answer.

The apples and pear are in a bag in the back of the cab, easy to get to if we feel hungry as we are driving along, but the officer also wanted to see the carrots. We explain they are packed away in the back and we'd have to unload the whole truck.

"Pull over there", the officer said, pointing to an open parking bay. It was pouring with rain, so we tried one last plea to avoid a drenching, "They were bought in a supermarket a couple of days ago", we said, thinking does she really want us to unload our whole vehicle to look at half a pack of supermarket carrots?

The answer was obviously yes. While Paul unloaded the back of our vehicle I learned from the officer that the CA DoA (we're in the world of acronyms) is looking for any nasty bugs and diseases that might get in and infect The Golden State. We couldn't help but wonder how they control the insects that fly around in the air from their neighbouring states, but so dour is her face we fear it might put her in a state of apoplexy if we asked. We got to keep our apples and carrots, but Paul's pear, missing its little sticky label of origin, is left behind at the border as we drive off, soaked to the skin, and a little bewildered.

the cash generator

At the dealerships at Marin County and Walnut Creek, we answered endless questions about our expedition and some of the challenges we have overcome, ably illustrated by our battle scarred Landy and a short video of our adventures in Central Asia. By the end of each day we were hoarse ➤

Main
Taking time out to enjoy the view in San Francisco.

and exhausted, but very happy. Our appearance had stimulated the best turnout ever, we were told, and delighted dealership staff took the opportunity to engage customers, old and new, on their needs.

Our Landy disgraced himself slightly during his star turn at Walnut Creek by leaking a little pink power steering fluid on a nice shiny showroom floor, evidence that Paul's temporary fix of the power steering reservoir way back in Siberia was finally giving up the ghost. The response was a flourish of activity, and within minutes, the great guys in service had found and fitted a nice shiny replacement.

From then on, Southern California was all about cars.

The Secret Car Club, less a secret than an 'invitation only' club, invited us to their weekly meet. Along with the club's mascot, Growly, a very fine Series III, we headed off to "Bottoms Up" at The British Garage, run by Andy from Newcastle, which turned out to be a chance to get up on the ramp and have a peer underneath. While there, Andy changed the transfer box oil, which turned out to be swimming with metal filings. We hope they are remaining from our Siberian transmission problem and not something new. With all the oils checked or changed, and with

confirmation that Paul would soon be replacing the front prop-shaft, we were back on the ground and on the road again.

That contact led us to a day out with the San Diego Rolls Royce Owners club, which in turn led us to being reserved a prime spot at a Saturday morning 'Cars and Coffee' meet – a spectacular classic American event we had thought only existed in the movies. At six in the morning, cars started rolling into a downtown car park. There were exquisite examples of British, American, Italian and German supercars, and an equal number of less powerful but equally lovely Fords, Dodges, Chevrolets, a Ford Model T in mint condition, and even a home-built 'Formula 1' lookalike. The old, the new, the fast, the slow, and centre stage – our Landy. At a rough calculation there was some \$10million-worth of metal there: and with rain forecast we were told that this was a quiet day.

bob-a-job

By keeping our ears and eyes open for any fundraising opportunity Paul seized the opportunity to completely rewire a Series IIA that was being rebuilt. The rewiring had been completed once already by a local mechanic, but on connecting the



Above
Preparing for Mexico with some additional security, applied in Silver City, Arizona.

Below
On the road from Gila to Silver City.

battery, the harness had fried. Paul accepted the job on the basis of self-confidence rather than experience, as he'd never rewired a vintage Land Rover before. Equipped with wiring diagram, a faint memory of fuseboxes, generators, and voltage regulators from his days rallying Minis back in the 1970s, he set to.

Three days later (and two restless nights punctuated by vague and foggy dreams about loose bullet connections, flaming wires, and alternator conversions) the Series coughed into life with no electrical dramas or smoke. Paul had spotted what the mechanic had not – an alternator had been fitted in place of the generator, so the voltage regulator needed to be wired

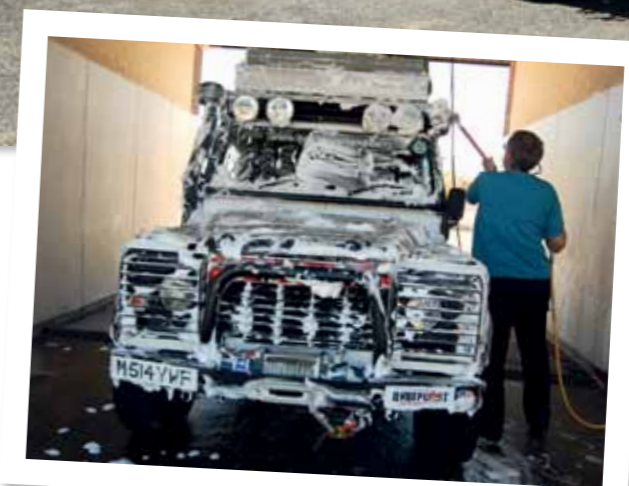
differently, as it was no longer needed for its original function.

With that job over we set off to our final key event in North America – the Overland Expo near Tucson – a kind of posh Billing. It's an event that focuses on preparation of overland trucks, and their overlanding owners, with lots of workshops and classes, as well as the stands selling services and parts for commercial preparation of trucks. Overland Adventure in the US is a very upmarket activity, with most trucks equipped with every conceivable gadget, and representing the extremes of overlanding hardware – right up to a \$500,000 truck.

We had been asked to attend as 'real overlanders' – people who were currently on expedition and passing through. We took every opportunity to brag about what a brilliant vehicle our Defender is, and to talk about our ideas and experiences on how to build an overland expedition vehicle.

The show was an important stop for us. After months of email exchanges we finally met up with Rou from Bundu Gear and received a new tent cover courtesy of Howling Moon. Our old friend Bill Davis from Great Basin Rovers also brought us the new prop shaft to replace the problem one that had been diagnosed back in California.

We got a rare sighting of a rather 'used' 130 when we met Captain Tiffy in a WalMart car park



Above
The Defender gets a thorough clean, ready for the Overland Expo. A Gila monster seem during our walk in Sabino Canyon Arizona.

During the show we met Land Rover enthusiast and journalist Anne Lockley, and recruited her famed resourcing skills. By the time we left the show, Anne had sourced replacements for our broken camp chair, our broken kettle, and our weakened auxiliary battery, the latter courtesy of Doug Aitken and the Houston Land Rover Club.

bound for Mexico

We headed off after the show, called in at Tucson to take a tour of the aircraft boneyard, and hiked up Sabino Canyon, where we spotted our first Gila Monster (a venomous lizard).

As a precaution against the threat of lawlessness further south, we also applied window tints and a grid of thin metal mesh to the rear windows of the cab in deference to all the

dire warnings we had been getting about Mexico, our next destination country. It wasn't going to defeat a determined onslaught, but a smash and grab raider would likely go away empty handed.

It was here too that, purely by accident, Paul discovered what had been making our filtered water run so slowly. It turned out not to be a clogged filter, but a slowly building airlock in the filter head. Once purged, it flowed smoothly.

Surprisingly, in New Mexico, we got a rare sighting of a rather 'used' looking 130 when we met Captain Tiffy, and his team of volunteers from the Venturers Search & Rescue organisation, in a WalMart car park.

With the Captain sleeping inside the vehicle and the boys in tents, the meeting gave us yet more food for thought about vehicle preparation, especially in setting up sleeping arrangements. You can read all about Tiffy's US adventure in the December edition of **LRM**.

With mass murders, shoot ups, and the assassination of a Police Chief bringing the troubles the other side of the Mexican border into the nightly news in the Southern States, and everyone we met urging us not to go there because "it's like driving into the devil's mouth", we were understandably a little apprehensive



▶ about how we would find the next stage of our adventure.

As we wove our way eastward towards our planned border crossing at Laredo, Texas, we were outwardly reassuring each other that all would be OK, while in the quiet moments we inwardly held some anxieties about the violence and the visibility of our truck as a likely target. We talked about many 'what if scenarios' and discussed options. But deep down, we knew that if the worst should happen, our only priority would be to get out alive.

Despite having spent hours in Vladivostok painstakingly obtaining all our permissions to temporarily import our vehicle into America, each with dire warnings that we must not leave the country without officially re-exporting our vehicle, we found the border crossing into Mexico required just the payment of a \$2 toll charge. After an hour of asking questions we were finally told the border had no mechanism by which to provide us with any evidence to show we had departed the country other than the toll bridge ticket. I suspect that according to US Customs, our Landy is still, unlawfully, driving around the US. Another American bureaucratic inconsistency to add to our tally.

serious culture change

Our poor heavily laden Landy struggled to stay cool as we raced up hill and down dale in what felt like a mad dash to safety across the troubled border territories. There is



Above
Growly the Series III. Club mascot of the Californian Secret Car Club.

Below
This RV park provides quite a natural looking setting, just outside Prescott.

clearly constant tension in this area, as modified pick-up trucks carrying heavily armed Federal Police, often in convoy, are frequent sights on the main routes.

Dressed head to toe in black, with military style helmets and intimidating levels of firepower, this show of para-military strength is a deterrent to the drug gangs seeking to take power in the region. But the greatest threat to foreigners, we imagine, is being caught in cross fire, rather than being attacked directly or captured as a hostage.

There is something surreal about an undercover war going on around you, while, to all intents and purposes, life goes on otherwise as normal. It wouldn't take us long to just accept the constant tension, and the regular military checkpoints, as normal.

It was a relief to reach Saltillo and continue south at a slightly more sedate pace before stopping our first night at a traditional Mexican motel with its secure parking. The regular clientele recognise it as 'discrete' parking, for their two, four, eight or twenty-four hour stay.

From there, it was a five-mile drive into the mountains, and through a tunnel quite literally rough-hewn out of the mountain, that took us into the historic silver mining town of Real de Catorce. In the evenings, teenagers raced their donkeys up the steep cobbled streets in the dark, while older locals enjoyed a beer or two in dim tavernas, and everything else waited for another day to dawn.

After spending the rest of our first week in Mexico clambering to the top of the ancient pyramids at Teotihuacan, and spending a couple of days enjoying the celebrations of the annual fair in the nearby town of Tecamac, it was time to head into Mexico City and for Paul to do the work that would earn us the cash to get our heads back above the water.

As we headed towards DF (District Federal) as it is known in Mexico, we were curious about what we might find. As we rounded a bend on a rise in the highway, the vast sprawling mass of humanity that makes up the second largest conurbation on earth unfolded before us. Sixty miles long and 30 wide, Mexico City has expanded to rise up the steep sides of the mountains that surround this natural basin, until the ground is too steep to hold buildings. A thick heavy pall of pollution hung over it, and the desperate rubbed shoulders with the hopeful.

All we had to do now was find our way to our host.

LRM

The greatest threat to foreigners in Mexico is the possibility of getting caught in crossfire

